

## VETERANS OF THE PULPIT

Methodist Ministers Grew Gray in the Service and Retire to Private Life with the Consciousness of a Life Work Well Done



REV. JESSE L. FORT

Jesse L. Fort was born in Warren county, Ky., May 1, 1816. His father, of German descent, was a farmer and a slaveholder. The farm was situated near the Mammoth cave, and the settlement at that time was a very scattered one indeed.

Until he was seventeen, young Fort remained on the farm assisting his father with the work. Schools were very far apart and the elder Fort, having lost an older son shortly after his return from a distant school, refused to send any of the remaining children away for an education. In 1830, while attending a Baptist revival, Jesse was converted and later joined the church, taking an active part. When seventeen he was apprenticed to a tanner, for whom he worked for three years. This man was a very ardent follower of John Wesley, and he succeeded in interesting the young helper in the work of the Methodist church, which he later joined and became a class leader before removing to Illinois in 1836.

The Forts located near Monmouth. In that vicinity for four years the young man served as class leader, exhorter and local preacher, under such Methodist leaders as William and Richard Haney, W. D. M. Trotter and Peter Cartwright, the latter serving as presiding elder of the district in which Fort labored. During this period the young preacher obtained his first start toward a book education from the public schools of Sangamon county. In August, 1840, when fairly launched upon his life work, he married Miss Martha McChesney. From that time until he assumed a traveling connection in 1851 he maintained direct touch with the church and its work. One of his most noteworthy tasks during that period being his connection with the building of the First Methodist church at Petersburg, Ill. Timbers for this building had to be hauled overland from Burlington, Ia., a distance of about 100 miles. Cartwright made particular mention of this structure in his autobiography.

After having established a traveling relation, in 1851 he was ordained deacon at the conference which met that year at Jacksonville, by Bishop Waugh. At this time he was transferred to the Missouri conference and later appointed to the Bloomington circuit in Macon county. After serving for one year on this work he was appointed in successive years to the Ridgely, Fillmore, Savannah and Rockport circuits.

Missouri was a very dangerous place for Methodist ministers then, and the "northern preachers," as they were termed, had to face even personal danger while carrying on their work. Several times mobs drove them from their appointments, and once while serving on the Rockport circuit, which then embraced nearly all of the Missouri towns along the Iowa line, a mob formed, the express purpose of which was to do away with the preacher Fort, who, contrary to his father's early views, was opposed to slavery. Fortunately, the ruffians were forced to abandon their search without finding the intended victim.

In 1855 Bishop Simpson, at the Missouri conference, which met at St.

Louis that year, ordained the Rev. Mr. Fort as an elder in the church. The next year he was transferred to the Iowa circuit and was located at Glenwood, where he remained for two years in charge of the church work. During his stay at Glenwood he visited Nebraska and preached at Plattsmouth, what was said to be the first sermon ever delivered in that town. After serving the Iowa appointment he withdrew for a short time from active work in the church. About this time his wife, who had been a devoted co-laborer in the work, died.

After losing all of his investment in a Methodist seminary which was started at a small town, Loudon, near Glenwood, he joined the Kansas-Nebraska conference at the meeting, which was held in Leavenworth in 1859. His first appointment was to the Falls City charge. When he visited the town he could find no suitable location for his family, and he removed to Nebraska City, where he preached as supply for a time. While located at this place he married Miss Mary A. Gates, of Zanesville, O., who was at that time visiting in the west. The next year he was placed in charge of the Methodist church work at Plattsmouth.

The Nebraska conference was formed in 1861 at Omaha and of the thirteen charter members but three are living, namely: Hiram Burch, H. T. Davis and J. L. Fort. From this conference, Rev. Mr. Fort was given the Peru district. There he remained for two years, during the time suffering a physical injury which has caused him more or less spinal trouble ever since. This injury finally compelled him to accept a superannuated relation to the church at the Nebraska conference which met at Brownville that year. The doctors advised a trip west and in company with a wagon train he crossed the plains in '64. This outing partially restored his health although he suffered financially, the Indians running off with the principal part of his outfit.

On returning from the trip across the plains he was appointed by the American Bible society to be superintendent of its work in Nebraska and Colorado. He was thus engaged for two years and then in 1867 he removed with his family to Omaha. There he received the appointment as chaplain of the senate of the Nebraska legislature, then in session. Two years later he located in Council Bluffs, having been made the agent for Pottawattamie county for the American Bible society. He remained in this work until 1879 when, having nearly regained his health, he applied for an active work in the Nebraska conference again. This request was granted and he was placed on the Palmyra circuit. While serving here his second wife died. In 1873 he drew the upper Nemaha appointment at the annual conference. During the year he married Miss Mary H. Freeman of Palmyra. Work on the Sallito circuit was long and arduous, the settlements being far apart and the roads mere cattle trails. His health not permitting further active work he again assumed a superannuated position and in 1873 moved to Peru that his sons might have an opportunity of attending the state normal school. After a three years' residence in the town he removed across the Missouri to the farm of one of his sons in northern Missouri. The outdoor life agreed with him and he was soon ready to take up active work in the church. From 1877 until 1885 he served in the following places: Honeywell circuit, 1879; agent American Bible society, Nodaway county, 1881; Hopkins, 1882. Other supply charges were filled until 1885 when his health not permitting further work, he retired from active service in the church and returned to Nebraska

where he lived on a farm near Palmyra until 1891, when he removed to Douglas that a son might attend the Methodist academy then just established in that place. After a ten years' residence in that town he removed in January, 1901, to University Place, where he now resides.

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Thirty-three years of active labor for the upbuilding of the Methodist church is the record made by Elder H. T. Davis, one of the first resident pastors in Lincoln and a veteran presiding elder. During his church labors Nebraska has taken a prominent place in the list of states, Lincoln has become its capital city instead of an unpromising frontier hamlet, and the Methodists of the city have recently dedicated one of the finest churches in the state.

When Elder Davis arrived in Lincoln in 1868, sixteen members of the Methodist church met for worship in a small shack occupying the site on which the building of the Lincoln Transfer company now stands near Tenth and Q streets. There was a \$400 mortgage on the structure and no parsonage for the minister. At the end of the first year the church was far too small for the congregation. The mortgage had been paid.

Under the direction of the pastor and the trustees, the building was sold for school purposes and a church costing \$3,000 was erected on the present site of St. Paul's. Elder Davis stayed three years on this charge and closed his term of service with a membership roll of 202.

At this time the congregation had given their building the name of the First M. E. church, of Lincoln. In 1883, the name was changed to St. Paul's.

Elder Davis was next chosen presiding elder on the Lincoln district and remained four years on this charge. The Omaha district was his next assignment. Next he was sent to the Nebraska City circuit. After remaining the limit on these charges he again took up his ministerial duties and was assigned to congregations in Beatrice and York.

At the latter place Rev. Mr. Davis was pastor for three years and presiding elder of the district one year.

In 1886 there were many calls from the people of South and West Lincoln for help in new churches. Grace M. E. church was in a flourishing condition and a new congregation was organized at Sixteenth and A streets under the name of Trinity M. E. church.

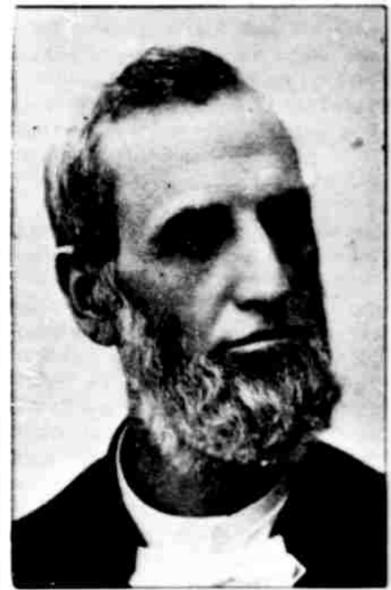
Elder Davis was the first pastor. The growth of the new church was rapid, and in three years the membership numbered 260. Today it is one of the strongest branches of the Methodist organization in Lincoln.

Since that time Rev. Mr. Davis has continuously served as presiding elder on the various districts in the state. In church circles he is well and favorably known and has a host of friends in all denominations.

Elder Davis is a native of Indiana, and attended college in Terre Haute. In 1857 he was married, and eleven years later moved to Nebraska. He bravely grappled with all the obstacles in the way of spiritual work in a new country, increasing the membership and arousing interest in church work. Wherever he has been assigned, he has usually remained the full time allowed by the conference rules, and he is regarded as one of the most ardent workers among the ministers of Lincoln and the Nebraska conference.

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Hiram Burch was born in London, Canada, December 11th, 1829. Nine years later his parents, sturdy Scotch people, moved their worldly possessions southward to Winnebago county, Illi-



REV. H. T. DAVIS

nois, where they located on a farm six miles east of what is now Rockford. Here young Burch remained for fourteen years. His education, as far as school work was concerned, during that time was confined to the common country schools. Early in life he had become a christian and had joined the Methodist church and, while still making his home nominally with his parents at Rockford, had spent a year on the Dubuque circuit in Iowa preaching under the direction of the presiding elder.

In 1853 his health causing him much apprehension, he decided to go south to see if it could not be benefitted. Accordingly that fall he went overland to Texas, where he remained for eighteen months. In the spring of '55 he returned northward to Kansas, where he was employed by the church authorities to organize a mission circuit north of a line running west from St. Joseph. After spending the summer in this work he joined the Iowa conference, which then included Nebraska territory and was appointed to the charge of the work at Brownville.

After making one trip to Brownville his appointment was changed to Nebraska City, where he arrived in November of 1855. At this place he inaugurated the work of building Methodist churches in the then practically new territory of Nebraska. In 1856 the first Methodist church in Nebraska was built and dedicated under his direction. And in this same building a year later was held the second meeting of the Kansas-Nebraska conference, which had held its first session the year before in Lawrence. At this conference meeting Rev. Mr. Burch and Rev. James Griffin of Kansas were ordained deacons, the first ordinations made by Methodist church authorities in the state.

After two years of service at Nebraska City he was appointed to take charge of the church interests at Plattsmouth, where he remained but one year. Florence, then the active rival of Omaha, was the scene of his next labors. There he served until 1860, when under conference orders, he was returned to Brownville, his first appointment. Frequent changes was the rule in those days and a year later he was appointed to the Pawnee City charge where he served for two years and was then returned to the Missouri river towns, being located at Peru. At this latter place, besides attending to his duties as pastor, he served as the financial agent for an association which built and offered to the Methodists of the state as an academy building what was later the first building used at the state normal, now located at Peru.

The corner stone for this building was laid in 1865 and the building completed a year later. On account of its inaccessible location the Methodists of the state thought best not to locate their school at that place and the building was placed in charge of private parties, who for a time conducted an academy. In 1867, when the capital was located at Lincoln and the various other state institutions thought neces-